DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 024 JC 970 130

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TITLE Distance Learning in Psychology: Organizing, Managing, and Mentoring.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 9p.; In: Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology (10th, Ellenville, NY, March 20-22, 1996); see JC 970 128.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Adult Learning; Course Content; *Course Organization; *Distance Education; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; *Psychology; Student Needs; Study Guides; *Teaching Methods; *Telecourses
IDENTIFIERS Iona College NY

ABSTRACT

To help meet the needs of adult students who find it difficult to attend classes regularly on campus, New York's Iona College developed video distance learning courses in psychology that combine independent reading, guided study, video program viewing, and faculty mentoring to provide a challenging learning experience for students. Video courses are offered in introductory, abnormal, and developmental psychology, as well as statistics, while all the videos include location shooting; real case studies; commentary from teachers, researchers, and clinicians; and animated graphics. For each course, the faculty mentors choose from several texts and study guides suggested by the creators of the video series. The study guides typically provide a lesson overview, lesson objectives and focus questions, related case studies, interactive questions, self-tests, a glossary, and a reading list. In offering video courses, it is important that a detailed syllabus be provided that includes specific strategies for approaching the course. Assignments include questions on case studies, research projects on students' own questions, reaction/research papers, and complete examinations. The mentoring process used with the courses emphasizes the need for regular student-faculty contact that encourages interactive, exploratory, questioning behavior, and feedback. Although some educators and students dislike the video format, advantages include increased one-on-one contact between students and faculty mentors, lower student costs, and the ability to accommodate students' schedules. (TGI)

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Distance Learning in Psychology: Organizing, Managing, and Mentoring

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Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology (10th, Ellenville, NY, March 20-22, 1996)

JC 970 130

Abstract

Distance learning programs at Iona were developed for adult students who find it difficult to attend classes regularly on the campus. Distance learning programs, in the form of video courses, combine independent reading and guided study with viewing video programs. Psychology courses that are offered in the video format include Introductory, Developmental, Abnormal and Statistics. This paper addresses the organizing, managing, and mentoring processes involved in "teaching" video courses. I discuss student characteristics, strategies for enhancing student performance, and assignments that can be used in assessing student competencies.

Distance Learning in Psychology: Organizing, Managing, and Mentoring

Distance learning programs provide students with the option of completing college courses without regularly scheduled classroom sessions. Typically, students are drawn from the growing population of adults who want to complete a college degree but who are precluded from a traditional course of study. Video distance learning courses combine independent reading, guided study, video program viewing, and faculty mentoring to provide a challenging learning experience for students. These courses replace the campus classroom as the primary place of instruction.

This paper discusses the organizing, managing, and mentoring processes involved in "teaching" video courses. Specifically, I address (a) the type of student who is likely to be successful as a distant learner; (b) choosing a text and study guide to accompany the video programs; (c) designing assignments and assessing competencies; and (d) encouraging the mentoring process. I also provide details regarding specific video courses that I have taught.

Distance Learning at Iona

Iona developed video courses for those adult students who find it difficult to attend classes regularly: persons who live far from the campus, parents caring for young children, workers with irregular schedules, and disabled individuals. Psychology courses offered in this format include: Discovering Psychology (Introductory), The World of Abnormal Psychology, Seasons of Life (Developmental), and Against All Odds (Statistics). These programs are produced by the Annenberg/CPB Project. Video courses are quite popular--we offer at least one video psychology course in the Fall, Spring, and Summer sessions. Course enrollments typically number in the 20-30 range.

Student Characteristics

"Distance learning in general requires mature students with specific needs" (Moore, 1993, p. 172). Our adult "non-traditional" students who enroll in video courses are typically in their mid-30s or older and are working full-time. All students must have completed some college course work and have good academic standing before being permitted to take a video course. Because these courses require extensive self-paced reading, note taking, and studying, students who are organized, motivated, self-directed learners do best.

Course Specifics

Video broadens instruction by making real events present, it communicates visually, it shows rather than tells (Zigerell, 1991). Video courses enrich the learning experience by highlighting and providing interpretation and analysis of course material. Video programs include: location shooting, real case studies, commentary from teachers, researchers, and clinicians, and animated graphics. The case studies provide depth to the Abnormal course and the graphics are particularly helpful in the Statistics course.

Video courses carry four credits and can be used for major or elective credit. Students are required to come to campus three times during the semester: to attend an organizational meeting and to take the midterm and final exams. Optional class meetings occur three times during the semester and include discussion sessions and exam review sessions. Students rent the video programs for the term (approximate cost = $50) or view them on reserve in our library.

Text and Study Guide

For each course, the faculty mentor can choose from among several text and study guide options that are suggested by the creators of the video series. It is essential that students use a study guide that coordinates the text and the video programs. Coordinating study guides typically

include the following sections for each unit: (a) lesson **overview**; (b) lesson **objectives**; (c)lesson **focus questions**; (d) related **case studies**; (e) **interactive questions** bringing together the text and videos; (f) **self-test** multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions; (g) **glossary** of important terms; and (h) supplementary **reading list**.

Structure of the Course

It is important to provide a detailed syllabus. Beyond the usual information, the syllabus should include specific strategies for approaching the course and a brief description of each unit. The syllabus should also include instructions that guide students to do the following: (a) review the study guide, (b) view the videos and take notes, (c) read the text and take notes, (d) do the study guide exercises, (e) make contact with the instructor, and (f) study with a group. Although these instructions seem obvious, students usually do not know where to begin or how to proceed without these guidelines. I also include information on forming a study group (e.g., I suggest that they exchange phone numbers with at least one other person).

At the initial organizational meeting, I provide an outline of learning objectives for each unit of study, including both process and content objectives. I describe fully the course assignments. I discuss strategies for working at home, for example, taking breaks, dealing with distractions, and handling interruptions. I obtain their addresses and work and home telephone numbers to create a mailing/contact list. Finally, I clarify my "teacher" role as that of mentor by explaining that I will guide their learning rather than present material in the form of lectures.

Assignments and Competencies

"Students . . . learn by *constructing* their understanding through interpreting present experiences and integrating them with their existing understanding of their world" (Moore, 1993, p. 173). In keeping with this notion, I designed assignments that encourage

students to:

- process, integrate, and synthesize course information;
- present their conclusions clearly;
- hone their writing skills; and
- develop research competencies.

This can be achieved, for example, by having students (a) answer thought-provoking case study questions, (b) identify questions that they have on specific topics and then do the necessary research to answer their own questions, (c) write reaction/research papers, and (d) complete exams. I urge students to consider opposite points of view from what is presented in the videos and text to test the merit of those ideas. I encourage them to make use of new technology (e.g., E-mail, fax) for delivering and returning assignments when possible.

The Mentoring Process

Ideas to consider:

"Teachers will evolve from lecturers to managers . . . of learning resources" (Murray, 1996, p. 40).

"Within this [video] environment, the teacher serves more as a consultant and moderator than as a presenter . . . " (Moore, 1993, p.173).

"To learn to think conceptually, a student needs to interact with another human being who can respond to his [or her] conceptualizations critically and helpfully" (McKeachie & Kulik, 1975).

To foster the mentoring process, I plan a regular schedule of student-faculty contact through telephone conversations, written correspondence, and E-mail interaction. If students do not contact me as scheduled, I contact them. During these contacts, I try to encourage the interactive, exploratory, questioning behavior that is essential to learning.

I give feedback to students early and often. The first written assignment is due the third week of the term. Each student receives detailed written feedback from me on the first and subsequent assignments. I provide a context to help students assess their work, for example by giving them information in the form of grouped frequency distributions for grades earned by the entire class on various assignments and exams.

Summary and Conclusions

Some " . . . educators are wary . . . because they foresee a loss of 'the human factor' in learning interactions" (Murray, 1996, p. 41). Those of us who choose to teach video courses must be aware that some of our colleagues will question the legitimacy and efficacy of video instruction. Additionally, some students who take video courses dislike the format. However, only a small percentage of my students report feeling his way and this number can be reduced by careful pre-registration advisement. Although these courses are not for everyone, many students evaluate them quite favorably and register for all four video courses that we offer.

Despite the concerns that some may have, there are advantages to video instruction. One-on-one contact between student and teacher is typically greater in video courses. For adult students, who rate one-on-one contact with faculty higher than younger students (Rosenthal, Folse, & Alleman, 1996), this is a plus. Distance learning can be less expensive for students because they can continue to work and earn, and they may have fewer child-care and travel-related expenses. Moreover, video courses provide a challenging learning experience for adult students while accommodating their scheduling needs.

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Conferences & Other Resources

1996 Adult Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) Conference is on Distance Education.

Annenberg/Corporation for Public Broadcasting Project, creators of several college-level telecourses. 1-800-LEARNER.

International University Consortium. The University of Maryland. 301-985-7811.